

Book Review**Reading Discontent in Contemporary Feminism****Arunima Deka***

Feminisms of Discontent- Global Contestations (2015), Ashleigh Barnes (Ed.), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp xxii + 252, Rs 850.

Feminisms of Discontent presents work of some of the foremost feminist scholars who wish to revisit the idea of discontent within feminist thought. This book deals with a wide range of issues like that of sexuality, queer politics, neoliberal governmentality, ideas of equality, freedom etc and is divided into two parts. The book centrally engages with key themes like 'subordination', 'dominance', 'governance', 'carceral' feminism among others. The introduction sets the tone of the book with an attempt to question the trap of sex/gender binary found in feminist literature all over the world and to move beyond. In exploring the various sources of discontent within feminist project, the editor cautions us not to cast discontent as a 'negative phenomenon' (p. xxi) rather points that it helps us to remain forever engaged.

Brenda Crossman starts her essay by making a claim that 'feminism is in need of a makeover' and need to move from 'criticism' as a 'fault finding exercise' to 'critique' which she opines is more 'self- reflexive' (p. 3, 4). Taking the case of Julian Assange and the case of sexual assault on two women, Crossman attempts to analyse the response of feminists, more importantly that of Naomi Wolfe to this case to build her argument about how power may be implicated. She points out that feminist critique must recognise the other dimensions of such cases and have to 'explore the contested meanings of such allegations' and under what conditions such meaning are always produced, where there is a need to look into 'entire apparatus of sexual assault legislation' through the lens of 'governance feminism' (pp. 16-17).

Ratna Kapur discusses in her chapter the tensions embedded in feminists' engagement with law in India. She discusses the challenge confronting feminism in taking up issues of equality and also violence against women. She points out how trends of 'dominance feminism' hugely impacted feminists in India in projecting their claims as distinguished 'Indian' from western feminism and also overwhelmingly focused on a politics of 'victimisation' (p. 24). The need to continuously prove their 'nationalist credentials' and to distinctly project 'Indian womanhood' as the ideal persisted amongst the Indian feminists (p. 25), which in turn made a huge impact on the discourse of rape law itself. Further elaborating on the challenges confronting contemporary feminism, Kapur takes up cases of 'sexual subalterns' (p. 28) gays, lesbians and sex workers, and also the problems of appropriating gender agenda by the Hindu Right which in turn have led to estrangement

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of Muslim women from the movement itself. She examines the 'Slutwalk' campaign around the world to once again question the politics of 'dominance feminism', and how is campaign, according to her, provided a platform to discuss issues of 'autonomy, sexual integration and pleasure' (p. 36). She reads Slutwalk as a form of feminism 'lite' (p. 35) not intended to bring about huge transformation but which can provide newer ways to look into female subjectivity

Kerry Rittich explores the politics of 'gender equality' and points out how the concept has been now appropriated and 'institutionalised' as a part of contemporary liberal democratic practices. However, despite being part of these project, feminists themselves need to inquire into issues of related importance like how these projects 'interact with formal rights and entitlements, alter established conceptions of gender equality, (p. 47) etc. Rittich further delves into the binary of public private and also the divide between women's human rights and economic interests to make her point of increased socio economic inequalities and insecurities, and also changes in the terms of engaging with the state for protection. The politicisation of the concept of gender equality has turned it into a 'subject of negotiation and calculation: what it is good for, how much and for whom' (p. 60) the author very correctly points out. She points to the diverse way in which the concept is adopted and also designed, promoted and measured, turning it into a 'contested subject' (p. 59). As a viable alternative, the author suggests considering 'myriad social and economic projects that have implications for women's rights' (p. 63).

Margaret Thornton points out the tension between freedom and equality within neoliberal thought and how wider acceptance of neoliberalism itself has augmented gender inequality and also privileged freedom over equality. The spread of agenda of a neoliberal state and globalisation has left very little alternative before feminist groups who have all throughout relied on state for seeking protection and reforms. Thornton also reflects on the irony of feminist theorists' aversion to the notion of equality itself, some marking themselves more towards a pro market stand, which is nothing less than 'feminist melancholia' (p. 89).

Lakshmi Arya problematises questions of freedom and normativity and attempts to find out whether they have relevance in non-western cultures. She explores questions of adultery, marriage, fidelity using archival sources, ethnographies and individual memoirs of late 19th and 20th century Mysore, where these practices were found to go beyond the limits of given normativity and universal. 'The adulterous woman does not exist as she does in Western feminism' (p. 116), Arya points out. And, therefore the emancipatory route proposed by West might not be applicable in Indian context.

The second section of the book explores feminism and other identity categories, starting with Ashleigh Barnes' critique of the normative framework for defining identity of 'child' as found in UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and questions what power configurations are at work to construct such identity. Barnes aptly brings out the North South divide in framing such definition of a 'universal child', and not just provide critique for exclusion of the 'non-western child' (pp. 126-127) but also questions its applicability 'within the West' itself (p. 131). Barnes further explains the exclusionary nature of the CRC definition by taking up cases of children whose parents have problems of substance abuse, to contest the given notion of childhood as a period of 'happiness, love and

understanding' (p. 129). By critiquing the normative framework of these definitions, Barnes aptly exposes the politics of such constructions.

Vasuki Nesiah uses a feminist critique to investigate the identity category called 'victims' of human rights catastrophe within the area of transnational justice, where this category has gained a lot of importance. She argues that within this framework of transnational justice, 'victims' become visible through 'interplay between icons and measures' (p. 154), their 'victimhood' is venerated as sacred on one hand, and on the other their narratives are incorporated into databases and other measurement practices. She points out how truth commissions reflects this duality by constructing an iconic category of victims and also by breaking down their testimonies into quantifiable database mostly guided by donors interest to develop best practice knowledge to aid in making future recommendations. Marking a distinct departure, Maneesha Deckha talks of critical animal studies in her chapter. Both western feminist thought and also post colonial feminist literature has based themselves on a masculinist, human/non human binary. Rather, she points out the need to adopt a 'posthumanist' approach to explore relationship of power embedded in such binary and in the 'idea of species difference' (p. 179). Deckha contends very aptly how human-animal binary goes on to create other differences and hierarchies too, and urges post colonial feminism to adopt post human sensibility of critical animal studies.

The final two chapters of the volume explore queer politics as a way of locating some discontents that figures within feminist discourse. Aziza Ahmed, while critically looking at the photos of female soldiers torturing male Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, puts to question the limitations of dominance and cultural feminism perspective, and also thereby the 'erasure of Muslim men as victims of war on terror' WOT (p. 195). She critiques the trends of feminism which focuses only on women as victims, which in turn don't allow a Muslim prisoner to be seen as abused. As an alternative to this analytical framework, she proposes queer theory to examine relationships of race, sexuality and gender. She points out how queer theory as an analytical tool can help us looking at the 'blind spots' of feminism (p. 211) and move away from the 'male/female subordination dynamic' (p. 210) to understand the harm done to men too by the WOT. Arvind Narrain starts his chapter by raising pertinent question of queer politics and its larger connection to democratic politics itself. He asks the question whether queer politics is merely about rights of queer citizens? As an answer to this question, he points out that queer politics should not merely demand for equal rights for LGBT persons, rather questions notions of purity, caste, gender, sexuality and other hegemonic structures of society (p. 218).

The volume is an important contribution in reading these discontents with the current socio political positioning of a neoliberal state and provides us clearer clues to the future political projects of feminists' engagements. The essays in the volume attest to the importance of interventions made by feminist scholars to look at the discontents with some of the dominant feminist theoretical positions by calling into question how race, sexuality, religion, class, region also plays an important role in framing positions. It attempts at unpacking the crisis in feminism today in addressing the predicament of moving beyond just male - female binary. The title itself suggests contested meaning of feminism and helps us locate other peripheral identities of race, and sexuality to understand the dynamics of gender and power better.